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Heidrun Brückner, Hanne M. de Bruin & Heike Moser (eds.), *Between Fame and Shame: Performing Women—Women Performers in India*

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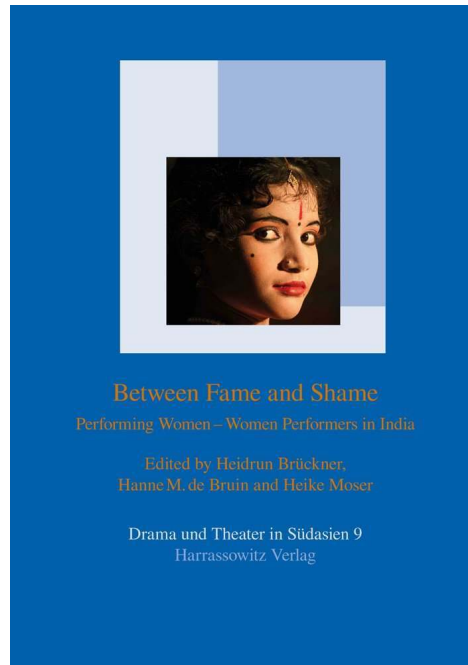
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Heidrun Brückner, Hanne M. de Bruin, and Heike Moser (eds.) (2011) *Between Fame and Shame: Performing Women—Women Performers in India*, Wiesbaden (Germany): Harrassowitz Verlag, Drama und Theater in Sudasien 9, 284 pages.

- 1 This remarkable volume, accompanied by a rich corpus of iconographic and video material (available on the web), contains contributions from a number of scholars from India, Europe, and the United States. In the foreword, one of the editors, Heidrun Brückner, professor of Indology at the University of Würzburg in Germany and a specialist of ritualistic drama and oral literary traditions in South India (Brückner 2007, Brückner & Zarilli 2009, Brückner & Zoller 2007), informs the reader that:

This book highlights the involvement of women—real or through representation—in a range of performances found in different geographical areas and among different social groups in India. It is the outcome of the 3rd International Würzburg Colloquium on Indian Studies entitled *Changing Roles and Perceptions of Women Performers in Indian Culture*, held at the University of Würzburg, Germany, in 2005, and aims to help us understand better the troubled relations between women and the public performances. (Brückner et al. 2011: 9)



- 2 Soon after, Brückner specifies that, even though each essay focuses on a particular kind of performance ‘this book will not attempt to theorize the concept of ‘performance’. ‘Performance’ here is used loosely to refer to a number of cultural events, which are—in varying degrees—set apart from day-to-day life because they involve or create a ‘special space’, a ‘special time (frame) and/or occasion’ and use ‘special people’, for instance trained or initiated performers and ritual specialists. The cultural performances described in the following essays range from possession performed by women as a religious service to a deity, or as medium of access to ‘divine discourse’ to on-stage performances by professional actresses representing different performance genres (p. 9). The book is a precious contribution to the study of Indian female ritualistic performers, stage and cinema actresses, dancers, as well as to the analysis of feminine characters impersonated by male actors. It also deals with the female individual and mass possession in rural South India, where women act as mediators between village deities and humans, by focusing also on the process of moralization and stigmatization of those cults in which women are the main performers.
- 3 The volume is divided into three main parts, namely, ‘Theory’, ‘History and Social Context’, and ‘Interpretation’. The first part frames ‘theoretically’ the changing status of performance genres and the role of women performers therein. The second part contextualizes historically the attested presence of female performing artists on the stage in ancient times by analysing Tamil, Malayalam and Sanskrit epigraphic and literary sources. The socio-political order in which such arts and ritual performances evolved and were enacted firstly in temples theatres and, later, on the cinema screen is also analysed here. The third and last part of the volume is entirely devoted to the techniques of learning, interpreting and, finally, rendering female roles on the stage by male artists.

The book presents twelve articles with multidisciplinary methodological approaches and employs a variety of analytical tools borrowed from various disciplines, such as the history of performing arts, epigraphy, anthropology, ethnomusicology, analysis of performance, and biographical accounts. It enriches extensively the study of female performing and ritualistic artists and represents a precious contribution to previous path finding volumes (Srinivasam 1983, Marglin 1985, Bor 1986-1987, Kersenboom 1987, Assayag 1992), which have already paved the way for many scholars dealing with such a complex, controversial and highly 'gendered' topic (Jordan 2003, Leucci 2005, 2008, 2009, De Bruin 2007, Peterson & Soneji 2008, Soneji 2010, 2012).

- 4 Ironically, in the recent past as well as in the present time, the position of women performers in society swings constantly from the heights of 'fame' to the lower levels of 'shame'. Such an unsafe and dramatically precarious destiny, unfortunately, is not specific to India. As cultural historians of the performing arts know well, it also deeply marks the lives of a majority of the female performing artists in Europe, as Hanne M. de Bruin mentions in her well-structured and informative introduction to the volume ('Contextualizing Women and Performance in India: An Introductory Essay', pp. 11-38).
- 5 There are no exceptions, therefore, for the Indian professional female performers, especially those belonging to the so called 'subaltern' classes (to use Antonio Gramsci's terminology). Those women today must still struggle to face and resist the old dominant patriarchal system and its 'modern' but equally pernicious guise which percolates through all levels of Indian society. By imposing its upper class code of behaviour, which is strict and moralistic toward their own women, the new forms of the patriarchal power push the entire female population into a total subordination to male authority, irrespective of the social class of the women concerned. Supported by the ambiguity of the actions of some social and political activists, its percolating action has even reached those few areas left to the 'subaltern' female agency where, until recently, women held a powerful position in some socio-religious contexts, though limited to the duration of the ritual itself. Thus, the volume contains some very interesting contributions about the *Siri* and *Renukā-Ellamma* ceremonies and possession cults that are still performed today in the Tulunadu region (southern Karnataka), in Dharward District (northern Karnataka), and in the borderlands of the Indian states of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.
- 6 The first article by Peter J. Claus ('Reflections on Folk Literary Criticism', pp. 39-65) analyses the rich repertoire of *pāddanas* songs in Tulu-speaking areas of southern Karnataka. The author focuses on the variations mirroring their dynamism as well as the active intervention by the female singers in the process of their preservation, personal elaboration, literary criticism, and additions to the orally transmitted corpus. The second article, by Elisabeth Schombucher ('Divine Words, Human Voices: Listening to the Female Voice in Performances of Possession', pp. 67-94), completes the first part of the volume on 'Theory'. The author accurately analyses a possession cult involving a female impersonator of the fishermen's goddess *Bhūlēkamma* by focusing her attention on the customers and devotees as well as on the songs accompanying the cult in the Telugu-speaking area of coastal southern Orissa.
- 7 The first article in the second part devoted to 'History and Social Context' is by Heidrun Brückner ('Folk Culture and Modernity: The Case of Goddess *Renukā-Ellamma* and her Special Devotees', pp. 97-121). This fine contribution deals with a very controversial cult, which has in past decades attracted the attention of local government authorities, NGO associations, social workers, and religious institutions (Assayag 1992). Having myself

studied the South Indian *devadāsī* traditions and their legal abolition in 1947 by the *Devadāsī* Act followed by its implementation by the regional states (Leucci 2005, 2008, 2009, Soneji 2010, 2012), I particularly appreciate Brückner's analysis of the process of 'moralization' and 'criminalization' of the devotees of that cult by the local government (Karnataka *Devadāsī* Act). Based on my own experience when I attended, in the early 1990s, the ceremonies of this goddess in the temples of Saundatti and Chandragutti, here referred to by the author, Brückner's interpretation of a pamphlet distributed by the Government and NGOs in these sites of worship is truly remarkable. She contextualises historically the debate over the legitimacy and pertinence of such cults, in which until a recent past, women were involved and highly empowered. By acting as the main agents between the deities and the villagers, during these rituals, a large number of women and also transgender devotees of the goddess, used to perform devotional dances and erotic songs in praise of *Renukā-Ellamma*. Such forms of cults include cases of mass possession, trances, soothsaying, and rituals to prevent and appease those forces believed to cause all sorts of distress and diseases among the villagers. Thus, for the sake of the welfare of the people animals and crops, the women led long processions of devotees to the shrines of the goddess in order to cure diseases, to get abundant rainfalls, to prevent drought, epidemics and famine. But recently, such devotional practices and related repertoires of songs and dances have been the targets of virulent campaigns of moral and religious 'condemnation'. By accusing the women of being engaged in prostitution, such campaigns humiliated and disempowered the women of their rights to perform those ritual tasks. By forbidding them to participate in such ceremonies or by putting them in a marginal and subordinate position towards the male priests, such reforms allowed the men to usurp the women's previous rights and functions as the main agents of such cults. 'It was evident that none of these women had anything to do with prostitution, [writes the author] but all were villagers engaged in practicing their devotion to the goddess in order to obtain her blessing and protection' (Brückner *et al.* 2011: 112). Brückner then identifies some of the strategies adopted by the *Renukā-Ellamma*'s devotees in response to the threats against their ritual practices (performances in private contexts and no more in public, the hiding of some ritualistic tools, etc.). By analysing the words employed in the pamphlet, she observes that:

the legal discourse of the *Devadāsī* Act is complemented by a sanitizing medical (or public health) discourse which also includes a moral discourse. All those discourses are interwoven to mark the practitioners of popular religion as backward, uncivilised, superstitious, immoral and indecent. Their practices are 'criminalised' and 'pathologised' because they deviate from the cultural mainstream of the middle-classes, which is also supported by the media. The main thrust is directed against women who do not follow the lifestyle of middle-class wives. Legally 'valid marriage' to a single husband and the exclusive serving of this husband according to the *Pativrata* (a chaste and submissive spouse) ideal is propagated as the highest value. Such a lifestyle would not permit women to render religious service by performing domestic rituals in other houses and collecting alms on certain days. (pp. 112-3)

- 8 The following article by B. A. Viveka Rai ('Gender in Folk Narratives with Special Reference to Tuluva Society, in the West Coast Region of Karnataka, India', pp. 123-33) is a fine study of *Bhuta* cults and *Siri* mass female possession in Tulunadu. Rai brilliantly analyses the effects, unfortunately not always positive, of so-called 'modernity' on the local ritualistic performances and mass possessions. By reading the results of these superimposed interventions, one is tempted to question the real benefits for the 'health

and wealth' of those impersonators (both male and female ones), who are forced to accept the moralistic 'modern' behaviour, which deprives them, and their traditional socio-religious practices, of sense, respect and empowerment.

- 9 The third contribution by Lea Griebel and Sina Sommer ('Siri Revisited. A Female 'Mass Possession Cult' without Women Performers?', pp. 135-52) completes the complex picture proposed by Rai by adding very important elements and precious material to question the *Siri* possession cult and its deep 'transformation'. The two authors ponder on the present 'paradoxical' situation where, in an essentially 'female' mass possession cult, the very presence of women is today becoming rare as the cult is being progressively either 'tamed', 'sanitized' or entirely 'erased' for a number of reasons, some of which have been already evoked.
- 10 The fourth article by Diane Daugherty ('Subhadra Redux: Reinstating Female *Kūṭiyāttam*', pp. 153-67), deals with the new life of an ancient text of a *Kūṭiyāttam* play, which had not been staged for long time. The author impressively relates the process of the 're-constructing' of this play, the choices made by the present female artists in Kerala to make it 'live' again, and the great challenge and excitement of reviving it for a modern audience. Daugherty analyses the impact on the preservation of the hereditary female performers in the *Kūṭiyāttam* performing art, known as *Nannyār-kūttu*, which in the past used to be performed only on the temple stage, named *Kūttampalam*, for a selected audience of connoisseurs composed mainly by aristocrats and religious authorities during special ceremonies in the shrines. She also underlines the importance of having opened the training to students of other communities, which will help to preserve and to spread the knowledge of these arts to a larger audience in Kerala, India and abroad.
- 11 The fifth contribution by Heike Moser ('How *Kūṭiyāttam* Became *Kūṭi-āttam*, 'Acting Together'. Or: The Changing Role of Female Performers in the *Nannyār-Kūttu* Tradition of Kerala', pp. 169-88) is a detailed study of the history of the *Kūṭiyāttam* and *Nannyār-Kūttu* which takes into account ancient epigraphic sources on these theatrical traditions. It adds further insights on the history of these performing arts as well as the importance of the role played by the female artists in their development. Moser challenges here the general assumption about their Kerala autochthonous origins, whereas the inscriptions seem to locate them rather in the neighbouring Tamil regions. As noted by the author, in medieval times the two cultural areas were closely linked.
- 12 The sixth article is by Christine Guillebaud ('Women's Musical Knowledge and Power, and their Contributions to Nation-Building in Kerala, South India: A Case Study of *Kaikkottukali*', pp. 189-207). The scholar deals with a special type of female group dancing, called *Kaikkottukali*, which is performed in Kerala by various communities of women, including the high caste Nampūtiri (Namboodiri) Brahmins¹ and the lower castes of toddy tappers (men who climb the Palmyra tree to collect sap and make into an alcoholic beverage) and Dhobis (washer-men). Guillebaud points out the way each different community perceives, performs, and interprets the same form of dance, not just as mere choreographic variation but also as an ideological and 'caste conscious' manner of self-representation. All of these affect not only the construction of the step sequences, but also the choice of the accompanying musical instruments and related songs, the type of stage, props, costumes, and audience to be addressed as well as the 'right way' they feel the dance itself should be presented, recorded, 'labelled', and finally 'appreciated'. The study also analyses the recent history and the 'nationalist' appropriation of *Kaikkottukali* dance, the places and contexts where this dance is regularly taught and performed, the now

widespread competitions held in schools and other venues, and finally the way this practice helps to build a proud symbol of regional 'identity' of Malayali cultural heritage in the minds of the people.

- 13 The seventh contribution, which completes the second part of the volume, is by Brigitte Schulze ('Poetic-Painful Lives of Women Performers vis-à-vis High-Caste Moral Modernity as Remembered by Kamalabai Gokhale and Retold by Brigitte Schulze', pp. 209-20). In her touching article, the author relates the conditions of abandon and oblivion in which she found in Pune the stage artist Kamalabai Gokhale, a woman now in her nineties, who was perhaps the first movie 'star' of the Indian silent cinema. Through the reminiscences of her bygone days of glory, which were also filled with suffering and struggles, we get a clear picture of the daily life of an Indian professional actress in the theatre and cinema troupes during the beginning of the 20th century. Here again the reader can easily trace, in the words and the memories evoked by the artist, the stigma attached to women working in the fields of performing arts by the upper classes 'moralistic' judgements. Such a disgraceful attitude, which was a mixing of Christian missionary condemnation, Victorian puritan codes of behaviour, local socio-religious legal proscriptions as well as the general obsession with female chastity and purity, became particularly virulent and widespread in India from the second half of the 19th century (Srinivasan 1983, Marglin 1985, Bor 1986-1987, Kersenboom 1987, Jordan 2003, Leucci 2008, 2009, Peterson & Soneji 2008, Soneji 2010, 2012).
- 14 The third and final part of the book, devoted to 'Interpretation', starts with an article by Marlene Pitkow ('The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: *Kathakali*'s Females and the Men who Play Them', pp. 223-43). By paraphrasing, pertinently and with a pinch of humour, the title of one of the famous spaghetti-western movies by Italian director Sergio Leone, Pitkow gives us a clear and well-argued explanation of the three major typologies of female characters as delineated in the *Kathakali* plays and interpreted by male actors. Mirroring the general ambiguity and suspicion surrounding 'femininity', which is not peculiar to India, such heroines are divided mainly into the following: (1) the good, modest, chaste, subservient, and faithful ones; (2) the bad, though ambivalent ones, often smart seductresses, good and beautiful in their behaviour and appearance, but treacherous and canny in their true intentions; and (3) the ugly and tricky ones, sort of female devils, but still not deprived of comic and tragic character. The author underlines how, since the emergence of *Kathakali* in the late sixteenth century, 'a predominantly male community of patrons, composers, and artists has shaped the female characters' (p. 223). In her essay, she explores the way by which
male artists have chosen to interpret female roles through their largely exclusive enactment of them. Their impersonations articulate a male view of the female in her mythically divine and mortal forms. Furthermore, these representations reflect a uniquely Hindu-specific form of gender play in which both deities and demons transform their sexual identity at will. Each of the three female character types in *Kathakali* has a direct homologue with a goddess construct or archetypal female figure in Hindu lore. [...] and they reflect and play on the gender slippages involved in a male construction and impersonation of the feminine. (pp. 223, 241)
- 15 The second and last contribution of this third part is by Virginie Johan ('Actresses on the Temple Stage? The Epic Conception and Performance of Women's Roles in *Kūṭiyāttam Rāmāyana* Plays', pp. 245-74). As Pitkow brilliantly did in her contribution, Johan also describes the actors' dramatic technique of evoking, during their training and their performances on the stage, past events, places, and situations not always mentioned or

directly connected with the main plot of the drama. Consequently, such peculiarity of pan-Indian performing arts' technique of interpreting and rendering the characters on stage allows each actor and actress during their performance to impersonate different roles (of human and animals too, both male and female ones) irrespective of the performer's sex. Though Johan's essay is well documented, I do not always agree with her argumentation. For instance, in the conclusion, the author states that 'this theatre can be called 'epic', not only because it is narrative, but also in the Brechtian sense of the term' (p. 249).

- 16 This comparison seems to be rather misleading. First of all, the impersonation of different characters by a single artist is certainly a specific Indian dramatic technique, which is quite effective and practical too, if one considers the limited number of actors in a troupe. As mentioned above it is not confined to *Kūṭiyāttam* or *Kathakali* performances, but is a well spread conventional way of acting among several Indian styles of theatre and dance. However, if one would trace any Asian origin or any formal similarity between 'Brechtian' technique and such a specific stage convention, has to find its roots not in the Indian theatre, but rather in the Chinese drama tradition. In fact, Brecht himself was directly inspired for the elaboration of his 'epic theatre' concept and related acting practices by the remarkable interpretation of female roles of the *Peking Opera* virtuoso Mei Lan Fang (1894-1961), whom the German playwright met in Moscow in 1935. Thus, despite a formal affinity between the two techniques of acting (the Brechtian and the Indian ones), their respective goals are essentially different. Brecht's epic theatre aims to convey political awareness by avoiding emotion, or in his own term 'distanciation' or 'estrangement effect' (*Verfremdungseffekt*), both between the character and the actor impersonating it, and between the actor and the audience attending the performance. By this technical device, Brecht wanted the audience to reach an intellectual perception of the socio-political situations, in order to be able to criticize it and change it. At the opposite, the 'aesthetics' of *Kūṭiyāttam* (as most of Indian theatres) is based on the principle of 'empathy', by arising and conveying emotional flavour (*rasa*) in both the actors and the audience, through the gaze (*rasadrsti*) as well as through gestures, facial expressions, songs and music, among others dramatic elements. And finally, as far as politics is concerned, it is doubtful that the *Rāmāyāna*, or the 'Epic of the prince Rāma' and his faithful and submissive wife Sītā, aimed to transmit any 'distance' from the royal socio-cosmic order (*dharma*) portrayed and eulogised here, or strengthened any political consciousness in the audience, including the will to change such hierarchical order, as it is the case in Brecht's 'epic theatre'. Consequently, the author's analysis on the 'affinity' of the Brecht's 'epic' acting technique of 'estrangement effect', with the one employed today by the *Kūṭiyāttam* performers, though quite intriguing, is not very convincing for lack of proper evidence given the deep difference of their employment, their contents and their respective aims. Therefore, coming back to Johan's quotation, if one can call the *Kūṭiyāttam* 'epic' it is only because it is indeed formally narrative, because it employs the rendering of several characters and dramatic situations by a single actor, and finally, I will also add because it is 'didactic one', in the sense that instructs the spectators how to well behave in order to preserve the socio-cosmic order of *dharma*. But certainly it is not 'epic' in the Brechtian sense of the term because, on the contrary, Brecht's 'didactic theatre' has to instruct the audience to oppose and change, if needed, the established socio-political order.

- 17 Perhaps, it would have been more appropriate to title the volume *Between Fame and Shame: Performing Women—Women Performers in (Southern) India* as, out of the twelve articles presented in it, only one deals with the stage and silent movies actress from Maharashtra, Kamalabai Gokhale, whereas all the others are devoted to the ritualistic and performing traditions of the southern Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, and the Telegu-speaking region of southern Orissa. Though Heidrun Brückner herself, in the foreword of the volume, mentions that ‘there is a regional focus on South India, especially Kerala and Karnataka’ (Brückner *et al.* 2011: 9), no further explication is given for the final choice of the title. However, in future it would be very interesting indeed and quite challenging, too, to extend the same type of analysis to the female performers of central and northern India. Such study would definitely enlarge the picture and, eventually, would highlight similarities or noteworthy regional differences between all those equally rich performing traditions.
- 18 In conclusion, the present volume, for its interdisciplinary approach and its scholarly value, represents an excellent collection of studies about the rendering of feminine characters on stage by male performers and the crucial roles played by the women themselves within the complex and variegated ritualistic and performing arts of southern India. It will be fruitful and very informative to scholars and students of theatre, dance and cinema, and also to the specialists of religious cults and related music and literary oral traditions still performed in both rural and urban contexts.

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NOTES

1. N.B. *Namboodiri* is the English transcription of the Tamil and Malayalam term *Nampūtiri*.